

Good evening and thank you for having me,

My name is Derek Lefcort. I am a Junior Electrical Engineering student at the University of Connecticut, and I grew up in Derby, CT. Oftentimes when I meet people on campus, I simply refer to Derby as “some small town somewhere near New Haven”. What I don’t tell them is that, in 2019, Derby had the fifth-highest number of murders per person in Connecticut and ranked 7th in most thefts and burglaries. I omit that 1 in 30 people in Derby is the victim of a crime.

As you can imagine, these harsh statistics aren’t really appropriate during our icebreakers on the first day of class. And I honestly had no idea just how bad my hometown was until recently. Being raised by a single mom, I knew we weren’t exactly rich and never really went on vacation, but my mother always did her best to make me feel comfortable. Regardless of our financial troubles, there was always food on the table. And when Christmas time came around, she would max out a credit card just to make sure Santa stopped by. All of this to say, I grew up disadvantaged in some ways, but fortunate in many others.

Where I struggled most, was in my ability to dream. Growing up in such a small, simple town and with many of my family members barely getting through high school, I had absolutely no idea how college worked. I knew I loved school and I was good at it, but I was terrified of aiming too high and felt undeserving of dreams bigger than my hometown.

When I got to college, this all began to change. I took part in many of the programs that are funded by the Institute of Student Success, but the program that has truly changed my life is the McNair program.

Since the Fall of 2020, I have been continuously involved with the McNair program as an apprentice, peer mentor, and now scholar. And I could spend hours talking about all the helpful resources and amazing research experience I gained from this program. But truly it is the connections I have made with faculty members and my fellow McNair scholars that have bettered my life as a whole. These connections are the beating heart of my college experience and have helped to dismantle those towering barriers that stood between me and my goals. And it is because of these connections, that I plan to pursue a Ph.D. after graduation in hopes of one day becoming a college professor.

Fortunately, these connections are not unique to the McNair program and can be found all over UConn’s campus. In every residence hall and study room, people are fostering new relationships and achieving what they never thought possible. This is why UConn requires your continued support. Without a large public research institute like UConn and the resources it has

been afforded, students from underprivileged backgrounds would have no opportunity to escape their upbringing. Students who would never know what they could achieve if they had just dreamed a little bigger. For many like myself, it's impossible to shoot for the stars when you've lived your entire life under a cloudy sky. And for me, that first sunny day came when I arrived at UConn.

Thank you to the General Assembly for your past support of UConn and thank you for holding this hearing and providing me the opportunity to share my story.